

**Direct Action, Education, Consciousness-Raising, Activism and the Internet:
Methods for Combating Street Harassment**

Evolution versus Socialization: Scholarship on sexual harassment in general seems to follow one of two theoretical models: (1) sexual harassment of women by men is a manifestation of evolution and men's nature or (2) sexual harassment of women by men is a manifestation of socialized male power and dominance. Feminists largely fall into the latter category and this project will likewise use the framework that sexual harassment, even on the streets, is a demonstration of gender power and privilege. However, the following is a brief overview of the evolutionary/nature view point. Scholars like Barbara Smuts, David Buss, and Felicia Pratto agree that men should not harass women but argue that to best understand how to combat the problem people must look at the issue as one resulting from evolution. They see men's effort to control female sexuality as a characteristic that has evolved over time to better ensure that men will reproduce, and so they see men's desire to control women to ensure reproduction manifested in many ways, including through street harassment.¹ Smuts particularly notes that men use aggression to try to control women, and particularly their sexuality, not because men are inherently aggressive and women inherently submissive, but because men find aggression to be a useful political tool in their struggle to enhance their reproductive opportunities by force.² Thus, these and other evolutionary perspective scholars believe that men cannot help that they innately want to control women and women's attention by yelling at them, grabbing them, and stalking them on the street; it is in their nature to do so.

¹ David M. Buss, "Sexual Conflict: Evolutionary Insights into Feminism and the 'Battle of the Sexes,'" in *Sex, Power, Conflict: Evolutionary and Feminist Perspectives*, ed. David M Buss and Neil M. Malamuth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Barbara Smuts, "Male Aggression Against Women: An Evolutionary Perspective," in *Sex, Power, Conflict: Evolutionary and Feminist Perspectives*, ed. David M. Buss and Neil M. Malamuth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Felicia Pratto, "Sexual Politics," in *Sex, Power, Conflict: Evolutionary and Feminist Perspectives*, ed. David M. Buss and Neil M. Malamuth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

² Smuts, 256.

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Feminists do not see men's harassment of women or desire to control them as an evolutionary aspect of male genes, but instead believe that men are socialized to be more dominant than women and women are socialized to be submissive or deferential to men. Thus, when there is more gender equity in society, there will be less street harassment. Scholars like Cynthia G. Bowman, Hawley Fogg-Davis, Elizabeth Grauerholz, Martha J. Langelan, and Catharine MacKinnon all discuss how cultural power differences between men and women can lead to different communication styles and socialization experiences, including the socialization of men to dominate others (both males and females). In light of this, since sexual harassment is often an effective way for men to achieve dominance over women, some men take part in it.³

Bowman, Fogg-Davis, and Langelan specifically discuss why it is illogical to view men's participation in the sexual harassment of women as a way to achieve reproduction. They argue that street harassment is not flirtation or courtship because most men do not do it with the intent of dating, having sexual relations with or marrying the person they harass, particularly when the harassment includes threats, derogatory comments about the woman, or leads to actual violence. Nor is street harassment usually a successful tactic if they want to try to woo a woman as it generally frightens or angers the women they target. For example, Bowman writes in her article that in her own and other people's studies questioning women's experience with street harassment, most

³ Cynthia Grant Bowman, "Street Harassment and the Informal Ghettoization of Women," *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 3 (January 1993): 517-580; Elizabeth Grauerholz, "Gender Socialization and Communication: The Inscription of Sexual Harassment in Social Life," in *Conceptualizing Sexual Harassment as Discursive Practice*, editors Shereen G. Bingham (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994); Martha Langelan, *Back Off! How to Confront and Stop Sexual Harassment and Harassers* (New York: Fireside Press, 1993); Catherine MacKinnon, "The Social Causes of Sexual Harassment," in *Sexual Harassment: Confrontation and Decisions*, ed. Edmund Wall. Buffalo (New York: Prometheus Books, 1992); Catherine MacKinnon, "Sexual Harassment as Sex Discrimination," in *Sexual Harassment: Confrontation and Decisions*, ed. Edmund Wall (Buffalo, New York: Prometheus Books, 1992).

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women did not like the attention and repeatedly cited a fear of rape and the intrusion upon their privacy as their main reasons why.⁴ Fogg-Davis writes that most girls first experience street harassment by males at or before puberty, and thus learn to see their womanly bodies as sources of sexual danger; their sexual vulnerability to boys and men becomes an inescapable and constant condition of being female.⁵

So instead of street harassment being evolutionary-evolved flirtation, these feminist authors argue that sexual harassment is about power, especially because behind the harasser's behavior could be a real physical threat.⁶ Langelan makes the point that the difference between sincere courtship and harassment is the use of power; "when the recipient has no choice in the encounter, or has reason to fear the repercussions if she declines, the interaction has moved out of the realm of ... courtship into the ugly arena of intimidation and aggression. Labeling sexual harassment as an inept form of courtship is a convenient fabrication to mask the abuse of power involved, a way to cloud and obscure the real dynamics of harassment."⁷

Scholars like R.W. Connell, James W. Messerschmidt and Margaret Wetherell who discuss the concept of hegemonic masculinity, the configuration of gender which guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women, similarly see men's harassment of women as a learned behavior and as one they are most prone to exhibit when they are with other men in order to prove or demonstrate their manhood.⁸

⁴ Bowman, 535.

⁵ Hawley Fogg-Davis, "A Black Feminist Critique of Same-Race Street Harassment," Presentation at the Philadelphia Political Theory Workshop, University of Pennsylvania, 30 September 2005, <http://www.polisci.upenn.edu/programs/theory/Fogg-Davis.pdf> (20 October 2006), 20-21.

⁶ Langelan, 41.

⁷ Langelan, 40.

⁸ R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," *Gender & Society* 19 (2005): 829 – 859; see also Margaret Wetherell, "Negotiating Hegemonic Masculinity:

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Imaginary Positions and Psycho-Discursive Practices,” in *Feminism and Psychology*, 1999, accessed online at <http://www.linguistics.ucsb.edu/faculty/bucholtz/conference/WetherellPaper.pdf> (24 July 2007).